



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: October 22, 2020

Agenda Item: Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease, Region 1

Action Needed: Final **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

Background: The Ray Kuhns Wildlife Management Area (WMA), located 8 miles northwest of Kalispell, primarily serves as an important winter habitat for white-tailed deer. FWP proposes a seven-year farming lease on 100 acres of the 1,530-acre WMA. This cropland area had been subject to a life-tenancy as directed by Ray Kuhns at the time of his bequest. During recent years, the cropland remained unfarmed and the life tenant relinquished the lease. The idled area was rife with annual weeds. As a pilot effort in 2019, half of the area, 50 acres, was farmed and planted to winter wheat by a local farmer in cooperation with FWP to ascertain whether the ground could serve as a functional farming lease, for the benefit of wildlife. Recently, FWP contacted local farmers about the potential lease opportunity and encouraged them to view this year's standing crop, in anticipation of a farming lease solicitation.

As proposed, the lessee would cultivate and plant agricultural crops, and retain a portion (up to 85 percent) of the harvest. The lessee would leave stubble and the remaining crop standing for wildlife to use as food and cover during winter and spring, and/or assist with planting of food plots or cover crops, primarily to benefit deer and upland game birds. In addition, the lessee would be responsible for weed control within the leased areas. The "no-cash" lease would be competitively bid to maximize the state's leave share and attract a tenant interested in partnering with FWP to manage the property for wildlife benefit and long-term soil health and productivity.

Public Involvement Process & Results: A draft environmental assessment (EA) was released for a 20-day public comment period on August 15, 2019, evaluating the original "proving up" and subsequent lease offering. FWP posted legal notice, issued press releases, and posted the draft EA on the FWP website. The EA received no public comment. A Decision Notice was issued on September 13, 2019, recommending proceeding with the pilot project and subsequent farming lease arrangement.

Alternatives and Analysis: Under the "No Action" alternative, FWP would need to commit additional resources to establish desirable vegetation and manage weeds on the former tilled ground, and wildlife use of these fields would diminish. Under the Proposed Action, FWP would lease 100 acres of former grain fields for a period of seven years for the mutual benefit of wildlife, FWP, and the lessee. Wildlife forage and cover would be enhanced, weeds controlled, and cropland soils restored, at little cost to FWP.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approval of this farming lease, in support of wildlife and more effective management of the WMA, in partnership with a local producer.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve the seven-year agricultural lease for the Ray Kuhns WMA as proposed.